

Hellfire and Marines

by Lieutenant Dawkins

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Summary: This is my first Halo fic. It covers the action on Halo as the marines see it. Iâ€™ve rated it PG-13 for language and occasional graphic description.

1. First Blood

This is my first Halo fic. It's told from the points of view of several marine fire teams, as well as individual marines within in the Company.

Enjoy, and read and review!

* * *

>The animated chatter of the mess hall flowed around the thickly-built marine standing in line, waiting patiently for his turn at the meal dispensers. It had only been half an hour or so since the Combat Alert had been cycled down to normal readiness and already the ship's marine contingent were carrying on the business of living. The three fire teams of First Platoon, One Company, were taking full advantage of their brief time in the mess hall and had taken up temporary residence at several tables in a far corner of the hall. After the wildness of the running battle between the Pillar of Autumn and Covenant battleships and the desperate, blind jump away from Reach, most marines were looking for something fill the void left after the adrenalin rush subsided. That something was, as usual, food. Food, guns, and women were the three most important things to a marine.

"Yo, Murdoch! We got a spot over here."

Geoff Murdoch grinned. "Och, laddie, there isna enough room for me. Some o' ye will have to shove long."

"Scoot, rookie!" Chris Phillips elbowed the newest marine off the bench. The men around the table laughed as Murdoch squeezed himself

in between two other marines.

"Bit of excitement back there, eh?"

"Oh aye. Too bad them sailor-types got to have all the bloody fun!"

"Yerra, no shite. Combat stations me arse. All we did was stand about, lookin' pretty!" Flaherty commented.

Several men pelted him with bits of bread. "Shurrup, Dickey. Everyone knows that's what us marines is supposed to do!"

"'Sides, mate, marines are always pretty."

"Aye, maybe, but I'd rather be pretty _and_ get to shoot things."

Murdoch grunted. "With as much shipboard drill as we done, it's a wonder that anyone wants to shoot anymore!"

"Righty-o lads. It's been fair luvvly chattin' wiv youse all, but I'm off to me rack for some much-needed shuteye. Don't be blowin' nuffin' up wivvout me." Tommy Bartlett said, rising from the table.

"Watch your snorin', bro. I'd like to sleep some too." His bunkmate called from the other end of the table. Bartlett smirked as he headed for the tray-drop, not bothering to reply. Murdoch tore his dinner roll in half and used each piece to soak up the remaining stew broth. Processed food had its advantages, sometimes, and the beef stew was the best on the menu. It tasted halfway real, at least. Something had to be real around here, after all. Talk turned to women, the marines' favourite topic, until the men finished their meals and drifted toward the barracks deck to catch up on sleep or went down to the muster bay for a smoke.

"C'mon, Murdoch. We're headin' back to the barracks for a game of cards."

"Hope ye got money to lose, lad, 'cause I'm gonna take it from ye!"

* * *

>Sam Dawkins dropped his armoured chest plate onto the shelf, grinning at the clank of armour on metal. His bunkmate had already shimmied out of his armour and was passed out on his bunk. It never took long for Bartlett to get to sleep. Dawkins peeled off his grey shirt and tossed it carelessly on top of his armour. Relieved to be rid of the sweaty garment, he kicked off his boots and pulled off the kneepads and shin guards. Wearing armour around the ship was a pain but Captain Murphy had made it procedure. Barefoot and shirtless now, Dawkins swung up onto his bunk. Most of First Platoon was crashed on their bunks, worn out from maintaining constant combat stations for nearly thirty hours. Grinning happily to himself, he tugged the lumpy pillow under his head. Rack time was the best time of the day. <p>And then the alarms started up. Dawkins swore as the barracks deck came to life with marines tumbling from their bunks. Some had gone to sleep still wearing all their gear while others like Dawkins and Bartlett had to scramble to get their armour back on.<p>

"Attention all combat personnel. Please report to your action stations. Fifth Platoon, secure airlocks on Deck Eleven. Fourteenth Platoon, rendezvous with Twenty-Second Tactical at Bulkhead Charlie Fourteen." A female voice announced over the loudspeaker.

Corporal Devereux of Baker Team stomped around the deck, barking at his marines to report to the muster bay now. Dawkins ignored the irritable corporal and swiftly laced his boots. His bunkmate, Bartlett, was trying to get his chest plate fastened in order to finish his preparations.

"Hold on, bro. You got it backwards."

"Thanks mate."

The loudspeaker screeched, "This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill."

Dawkins clapped him on the back as he grabbed his helmet and the two marines sprinted for the passage leading to One Company's armoury. The rest of Charlie Team were forming up to file through the armoury and pick out their weapons. Big Geoff Murdoch used his height to reach over several marines and grab an extra pistol and pawful of magazines. An assault rifle was slung over one shoulder, a pistol holstered at his hip, and there was a load of ammunition for both rattling around in the grenade bag that was hanging from his belt.

"Hey, Murdoch. You gettin' ready for war or something?"

"Just makin' sure me boys get enough to get 'em through."

"Get through what? It's just action stations." Dickey Flaherty asked.

The marines paused to listen when the loudspeaker went active again. "Attention all personnel. We are re-engaging the enemy. External and internal contacts imminent."

"Gettin' ready for that." Murdoch said with a grin and moved along with the line.

"Move it, move it, move it!" Sergeant Noyes bawled as his platoon hustled to form up in the spacious muster bay adjacent to the armoury. "C'mon, ladies, move like you got a purpose!" The sergeant drummed his fingers on the grip of his assault rifle, clearly eager to engage the enemy. "Listen up! Once again, the squids have made it our job to handle the mess they've gotten themselves into. The Covenant think they've got us dead in the water, but they haven't counted on running into this platoon! We are going to hit them, hit them hard, and keep right on hittin' until they run cryin' to their mamma! These ugly sons-of-bitches picked the wrong ship to corner, and they'll be warmly welcomed by a rain of lead. When we engage, we'll tear 'em to pieces so bad that there won't be enough to shove into a box! We are going to blow the hell out of those dumb bugs until we don't have anything left to shoot 'em with! And then, we are going to strangle them with their own-living-guts!"

Marines hooted their agreement. Noyes cleared his throat. "Our hour

is here, boys. We got a job to do. Ain't nobody goin' home if we don't show these Covenant bastards where to get off. You know the drill. Point, shoot, kill. Let's make sure our guests know just welcome they are! Whaddaya say, Marines?"

"Rough and ready, keep 'er steady, Sergeant!" The platoon roared back.

"That's the spirit! Action stations at the double! Move!"

* * *

>"Fire teams: sensors show inbound Covenant boarding craft. Stand by to repel boarders." <p>Charlie Team formed up near the portside airlocks on Deck Five, tense with eager nervousness. The six men watched the Covenant boarding craft make their slow approach. Corporal Phillips' fingers drummed an impatient tattoo on the barrel of his rifle. Combat was frighteningly less nerve-wracking than waiting for the fight to start.<p>

"You reckon this'll be our last scrap, Geoff?"

Murdoch looked down at Tommy Bartlett, a little worried at the use of his first name. "Isna for me to say, ye ken. Don't be talkin' foolish, neither. We're gonna make it through this just fine."

"I was on'y wonderin'. I got a girl back home, see?"

"Quit worryin', Barty. Ain't we marines?"

"Aye, marines. Walking cannon fodder."

Dawkins smacked his friend on the back of the helmet. "Shit can that bad attitude, you cow. Do your job and we'll get through this all right."

"Heads in the game, me boyos," Phillips called out. "Incoming our way."

Safeties clicked off and the marines fanned out to cover all airlocks. Bartlett swallowed his fears, determined not to let his mates down. Fear and hesitation got men killed. His buddy Dawkins flashed him a cocky smile as he brought his rifle up and Bartlett let the other man's confidence bolster his own. They'd get through this just fine.

"Safeties off!" Phillips barked.

"Off!" His marines answered.

"Here they come. Contact in thirty. Whaddaya say, lads?"

The ship shuddered under the impacts of hostile fire and boarding craft. Bartlett's mouth felt dry. He swallowed in an effort to get some moisture back.

"Rough and ready, keep 'er steady!"

One of the airlock doors blew open. Phillips lifted his left hand into the air, his fist clenched. The marines tensed. A cautious Grunt

poked its head into the passage.

"Pop 'em!" Phillips shouted, pointing. Rifle fire erupted and the Grunt toppled back into the airlock, missing half its head. Screams and yelps of other frightened Grunts accompanied the angry roar of an Elite. Aliens poured into the passage, scattering between the six marines.

"Alert! All hands, boarding parties on port Decks Four, Seven, and Twelve. Baker Team move to engage."

"No fockin' kidding!" Flaherty exclaimed. "She think we're blind?"

"Cortana's gotta be confused. Baker Team's only on Four Deck!"

"It's probably those reserve teams, y'know, the sailors."

"Heads up!"

"Way to go, mate!" Bartlett said when the greenhorn Reeves smashed a Grunt with the butt of his rifle.

"C'mon, keep it up!"

"Woo-hoo!" Reeves whooped, caught up in the wild rush of adrenalin. Bullets and plasma zipped around the airlock bay, scorching walls, ceiling, and floor. Covenant bodies began to pile up around the marines, but there were more coming from a corridor leading to the next airlock.

"Pull back!" Phillips hollered over the noise of battle. "The mess hall, back to the mess hall!"

"Warning! Covenant intruders on Decks Three and Nine. Alpha Team, engage enemy boarders." The loudspeaker announced.

"We know, dammit! Shut your bloody mouth already!"

"Let's get outta here!"

The marines covered their retreat until they reached a bend in the corridor. Dawkins tossed a grenade around the corner after them and then they ran. It wasn't far to the mess hall, but there were already Covenant waiting there for them.

"Fuckin' hell!" Reeves burst out, diving for cover behind a table.

"Two Elites!"

"Doesn't get any better than that," Phillips muttered, peeking around a meal dispenser. "Firing!"

Yellow tracers zipped across the mess hall, digging holes in the walls and tables. Murdoch found it sadly ironic that only twenty minutes or so earlier, they'd all been in here, grabbing a quick meal before an equally quick nap. Now they were shooting the place up, trying to kill the Covenant intruders.

"God, it burns!" Reeves dropped his rifle, clutching his side.

"Not in my bloody mess hall!" The Scotsman yelled, changing magazines. "Get 'em, lads!"

"Look, it's him!" Bartlett cried. A towering figure in light green armour entered the mess from the bridge-side door. The assault rifle in his hands spat fire at the enemy. Charlie Team cheered when the Spartan charged the Covenant across the mess hall, his shields sparking yellow.

"That's the way to do it, yeah!" Dawkins said as the Spartan used his rifle like a club and quickly dispatched the startled and confused Covenant. Then, just as suddenly as he'd come in, he vanished through the door on the other side of the mess.

"There's a badass for ya, woo!" Flaherty cheered.

"Didja see that crazy bastard? He's got no bloody fear!"

Phillips knelt to check on Reeves. "You all right?"

"That was great. What now?"

The rest of the team spread out through the mess, checking every entrance. "Nothing on this side."

"Nothing over here."

"Clear on this end."

"Dig in, we're hanging out here for a bit." Phillips said.

"Combat teams on Decks Five through Nine, fall back to secondary defensive positions." The loudspeaker blared.

"Bloody hell, that's us," Flaherty muttered.

"I wonder how Zulu Team's doing. My brother's the team corporal." Dawkins commented, looking around at the Covenant bodies. "Should we try to retake the airlocks, Corp?"

"Not yet. We'll wait for the rookie to get back on his feet."

Bartlett rolled his eyes. "Great. Can I take a nap now?"

* * *

>"Careful, they could be anywhere!" <p>The team moved quietly through the corridors, alert for enemy movement. Phillips was in the lead and praying that there weren't any nasty surprises being set for them. The Covenant weren't known to play by the rules.<p>

"Hey, Corporal. What do we do if there's no more lifeboats left?" Reeves whispered.

"Stay aboard and kill things, Reeves. It's our job."

"Look, is that a Grunt?"

Phillips inched sideways to get a better view. "I got him."

The single rifle shot sent three Grunts running pell-mell around the corner, straight into the marines' line of fire.

"Let 'em have it!" Dawkins cried, sprinting past Phillips to get a better shot. His mates weren't far behind, lending him cover fire.

"Dawk, take cover!"

"Frag out!" Dickey Flaherty shouted, pulling the pin on a grenade. He flicked the pineapple-shaped device at the enemy as his mates hit the deck. The grenade's explosion shredded the decking and walls, kicking shards of metal into the Covenant fighters. Grunts shrieked in pain as they fell.

"Yeah mate!"

"You want a little?"

"Hey, it's Fox Team!"

Alejandro Gutierrez high-fived Tommy Bartlett. "_Hola_,TomÃ¡s! Kickin' Covenant ass too?"

"Wouldn't be doin' nuffin' else, for sure."

"Good thing you got here, Sarge. We were a bit pinned down." Phillips reported.

"Heads up, boys. More comin'!" Corporal Fraser called.

The two fire teams fell into defensive patterns as a second wave of Covenant broke through the door on the far end of the airlock. It was a stalemate; neither side seemed able to overcome the other.

"Ops personnel on Decks Nine through Twelve, report to evac stations now." The loudspeaker said.

"Good thing we're not on Deck fuckin' Twelve!" Reeves exclaimed.

"Stow that language, Marine!" Sergeant Noyes barked and Reeves blushed.

Phillips slammed a fresh magazine into his rifle. "Hope you brought enough bullets for everyone, Murdoch. We're gonna need 'em!" He glanced at Noyes. "Ready to rock, Sarge."

"Up and over, everyone! We gotta secure this airlock!"

The twelve marines formed up for the charge, yelling wildly. It was semi-successful â€" the surprised Covenant retreated under the withering combined fire, but fought back once they found some cover in the passage leading deeper into the ship. Crewmen were appearing from behind the marines, running for whatever lifeboats were still empty. Plasma bolts sizzled through the air, forcing the sailors to duck or take cover.

"Come get some!"

"Get your own, I saw him first!" David Wilkins shouted as a Grunt toppled to the deck, dead. Dickey Flaherty grinned widely at the Aussie marine.

"There's plenty to go around. Pick one and kill it or I'll do it for ya!"

"All hands. This is the Captain. Prepare to abandon ship. Combat teams, repel boarders until Ops personnel are away. Good luck. Keyes out."

"Fire Team Charlie on Deck Five. Under heavy fire here." Phillips barked into his radio. "Ops crew on this deck are away. Falling back to secondary positions."

Fraser keyed his own radio. "Fire Team Fox on Deck Five. Covering Charlie Team."

The marines broke from the firefight to run for the relative safety of the passage behind them. To their surprise and relief, the Covenant did not follow. Their flight was a short one — the lifts connecting each deck were their secondary positions. Various non-vital members of the crew were dashing around, completely confused and terrified.

"Hey, people! Stop!" Noyes bellowed. The wild-eyed crewmen stared at him as if he was somehow going to magically whisk them off the ship. "Listen up! You know evac procedures. Y'all are sailors, act like it! I want single-file lines for each lift, now!"

As the frightened crewmen obeyed, Noyes rested his rifle on his shoulder and looked at the computer display embedded in the wall near the lift bank. He tapped a quick command code on the screen, and what he saw made him swear.

"What's up, Sarge?"

"The Covenant have taken Deck Four and working their way up and down. We're screwed if we don't find lifeboats." The sergeant answered. "Look, only a couple guys from Baker Team are still alive."

"Where are the nearest lifeboats?"

"Deck Four."

The radios in their helmets crackled. "All fire teams, this is Captain Murphy. Hold your positions until all other crew are away. Rendezvous planet-side with your platoons. Good luck and Godspeed, Marines."

"So which is it, Ops personnel or all crew?" Jacob Morse demanded.

"All crew." Fraser replied shortly. "Every leatherneck knows that the Captain of Marines doesn't take orders from some Navy ship captain."

The marines chuckled. Noyes looked at the display again. "All right, huddle up. Here's our game plan. Fraser, your team will â€"

"Combat teams Alpha through November, pull out to nearest evac station."

Noyes looked annoyed. "Your team will take Lifts One and Two. We'll take Four and Five. Once we're out, shoot anything that moves. The airlock with the lifeboats is here, about a hundred meters from the lift bank. No matter what, we are getting to those lifeboats. Got it?"

"Got it." The marines chorused.

"Good. Fraser, you'll cover our flank. Charlie Team will take the point. If we come across any crew, we're getting them out too. Let's go."

* * *

>Sasan the Grunt was bored. After storming aboard the infidel ship and killing the weak screamers, there was nothing to do. The big Elite in charge of their section was off somewhere, yelling at some poor Grunt for not doing his job. Hard to do a job when there was no job to do. One of the other Grunts assigned to protect the meaningless corridor yawned and tucked himself into a sleeping position. Sasan was tempted to follow suit but the thought of the bad-tempered Elite discovering them asleep on the job kept him awake.
<p>"Bored!" Another Grunt complained.<p>

Sasan hissed at him and he shut up. The sleeping Grunt blinked slowly.

"Stop hissing."

"Not me." Sasan said, listening. The wall was hissing. No, it stopped. Now it was opening up and armour-clad demons were pouring out into the corridor. Out of the very wall!

"Hit 'em, Charlie Team!" A demon yelled.

Sasan threw his hands into the air and ran. "Short ones first!"

* * *

>Dickey Flaherty shot the Grunt trying to run away and used his rifle as a club to kill another that was running in circles, waving its arms in the air. The rest of Charlie Team quickly dispatched the rest of the enemy and moved out with Fox Team close behind. <p>"Look, marines!" Two crewmen appeared from behind a damaged bulkhead, pistols in hand. "Are we damn glad to see you!"<p>

"Come on, we're getting outta here." Fraser said.

"There's some marines back this way. I think they're from Echo Team." One of the sailors said.

"Combat teams Sierra through Victor, prepare for evac." The loudspeaker blared.

"Let's get 'em, I'm not leavin' any marines behind." Noyes ordered.
"Fox Team, hang back and keep this section secure."

"Yes sir."

Charlie Team advanced along the corridor, following the two crewmen. The four marines were concealed just inside a maintenance accessway. They snapped their weapons up when the thin doors slid open, but relaxed at the sight of their comrades. One of them set his rifle back down and covered a wound on his shoulder with his hand. His left arm was resting limply against the deck. The shoulder armour plating had melted away and the deep plasma burn was visible under the tattered shirt. Blood trickled steadily down the man's arm, staining the grey sleeve dark crimson. His team-mate had two less serious plasma burns, one on his leg and the other on his side. The chest armour was scorched and melted at the burn site but still largely intact. The other two marines had been tending them as best they could with the single medical bag lying on the deck.

"What team are you from?"

"Echo, sir. I'm Hoyt and that's Patterson. Don't know what happened to the rest of our team. We were trying to find 'em when we got ambushed."

"We're from Baker. We heard the shooting and came to help." Corporal Devereux reported. "I've only got Blackwood here left."

"Can either of you walk?" Noyes asked the two wounded marines.

Hoyt nodded. "I can, Sarge."

"I can try to, but I don't know if I can keep up." Patterson said.

"Bartlett, Flaherty, help him up. If he can't walk, we'll carry him."

The two marines slung their rifles and bent to help Patterson to his feet. He hissed sharply in pain when he tried to put weight on his injured leg. Geoff Murdoch stepped forward and knelt down, allowing the wounded man to clamber gratefully onto his wide back. The brawny Scotsman straightened without apparent strain and strode carefully back to the corridor. Hoyt followed, his left arm hanging uselessly at his side. He clutched his rifle in his right hand, his white-knuckled grip shaking.

"Let's get 'em, Sarge."

Noyes was silent for a long moment as he studied the wounded marine's pain-pinched face and trembling body. "Corporal, give this man some painkillers. He's gonna pass out on us without 'em."

"Yes sir." Phillips replied, digging out his small medical pack. He inserted the needle into Hoyt's forearm and a moment later, the pale marine's features eased as the painkiller took effect.

"Thank you," Hoyt murmured, easing the fingers of his right hand open slightly.

An explosion rocked the ship. The marines were thrown off-balance and Murdoch almost went down. Noyes grabbed the pistol from one of the watching crewmen and swapped it for Hoyt's rifle.

"Just point and shoot, sailor. All right Marines, let's get the hell out of here."

* * *

>"There's the airlock. Two Elites and a bunch of Grunts. Piece of cake." Dawkins reported, peeking around the corner. <p>Phillips waved his marines forward. "Grenades first, soften 'em up a bit."<p>

"Catch this!" Reeves darted into the corridor and heaved a grenade. Three others sailed through the air toward the Covenant position. Screams and roars told the marines of their success and they charged. The few Grunts who weren't killed outright by the grenades were in no shape to fight and they were ignored. Sam Dawkins killed the one remaining Elite before it could summon help.

Geoff Murdoch and his wounded passenger were the first into the nearest lifeboat, closely followed by Hoyt. Fox Team fanned out to cover Charlie's marines as they crammed into the tiny lifeboat. Sergeant Noyes looked around uneasily at the mortally wounded Grunts bleeding on the deck.

"Hurry up, men, they'll be back soon."

"See you dirt-side, lads."

"Rough and ready, right?" Tommy Bartlett asked, exchanging a quick, complicated handshake with his buddy Gutierrez.

"_SÃ-_. Go, go, go!"

"Move it, Charlie Team, we ain't got all day!" Noyes snapped, waiting for Bartlett to get into the lifeboat. It was time to go.

* * *

>"Hold on, it's gonna be rough!" The lifeboat pilot called back. <p>Geoff Murdoch tightened the straps of his quick-release harness and glanced at the badly wounded marine from Echo Team, strapped in across from him. "All right, there, laddie?"<p>

"More or less," Hoyt replied through gritted teeth. "Wouldn't happen to have a cigarette on you?"

"I got one." Dickey Flaherty said, shifting in his seat to reach his thigh pocket. "Hope you like regular, s'all I got."

Hoyt took the cigarette with his good hand. "Thanks, bro."

"Just as long as you light up with me when we're dirtside."

The wounded marine managed a tight chuckle but didn't respond. Murdoch watched the man for a moment longer, then looked down the narrow aisle toward the lifeboat's hatch. Only a few minutes before,

the lifeboat carrying Fox Team had been in view. Now he saw nothing but empty sky. "Where'd Fox's boat go?"

Sergeant Noyes craned his neck to peer out the window. "Dammit! They must have dropped farther back.

"We're not gonna die, right?" One of the crewmen asked, his voice high-pitched with fear. Noyes scoffed.

"Stow that! You're with marines."

Murdoch wished he shared the sergeant's confidence. Beside him, Tommy Bartlett tried to whistle, but the sound came out broken between his dry lips. After a second, the Londoner gave up.

"Ain't no use tryin' to be cheerful wivvout that idiot Welshman about."

"You mean Dwyer? He's probably got the Covenant singing 'Peace on â€" ,"

The lifeboat shuddered as the airbrakes engaged. "Hang tight back there, I'm bringing us down."

Hoyt's right hand was curled tightly around his safety harness, his knuckles white. The painkillers must be wearing off. Murdoch felt for the other man but admired his refusal to let the pain get the best of him.

Another, heavier shudder shook the tiny craft. "Brace!" The pilot shouted, and Murdoch saw the ground rushing up to meet them through the hatch window. He closed his eyes when the lifeboat hit dirt. Hoyt screamed. Then there was eerie silence.

2. Fight or Flight

Charlie Team accompanies the Master Chief on the mission to rescue Captain Keyes. Privates Dawkins and Bartlett volunteer for a special mission.

* * *

>Sam Dawkins cracked his eyes open slowly, letting the darkness fade from his consciousness. He was still alive, somehow. After a minute or two of allowing his eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight, he moved his arms and legs carefully. There wasn't any restriction on his motion, but how? Wasn't he still strapped into the lifeboat seat? He remained prone, turning his head cautiously to study his surroundings. There was some kind of metal under him, an alien structure. Gentle rolling hills closed around the structure, providing a measure of protection. There were trees and rocks scattered around. What the hell was this place? Dawkins flopped onto his stomach and crawled to the edge of the deck. A ramp led up from the ground to the level he was on. He looked around the deck, but saw no one else. Wisps of smoke drew his attention and he recognised the lifeboat. It had come to rest with its nose buried under a mound of freshly stirred dirt, probably from the long swath of torn-up earth behind it. He thought he could see the outline of an arm on the ground, but couldn't be sure. Where was everyone else? And how had he

managed to get out of the lifeboat to end up here?<p><p>

Dawkins pushed himself away from the edge and rolled back toward the towering slab of steel in the middle of the deck. His rifle was gone, lost somewhere between the lifeboat and his current position. He hadn't thought to grab a pistol from the armoury before leaving the ship either. All he had was the knife tucked in his boot. Hardly a viable defensive option if the Covenant found him. Oh well. If he was going to die, at least he wouldn't be completely defenceless. He'd take a couple down with him. The marine pulled himself into a sitting position and rested his back against the metal wall. Waiting was always the hardest part.

There were footsteps on the ramp below him. Dawkins threw himself forward, crawling as fast as he dared in his armour. He pulled the fighting knife from his boot when he reached the edge of the deck where the ramp sloped up. There were several things moving up the ramp toward him. He could only take out one or two before the rest killed him, but it would be enough. As long as he went down fighting.

"Rough and ready," he whispered and tucked his feet underneath him.

* * *

>A blur of motion on his right caused Murdoch to drop the armload of supplies he had been carrying. He threw his hands up in time to catch the would-be attacker around the waist. The pair tumbled down and the big Scotsman felt the keen edge of a knife slice through the muscles of his arm but he bit back the cry of pain. He seized his assailant's wrist, using what little leverage he had to flip his opponent onto his stomach.<p><p>

"What the bloody hell are you doin'? Are you mad?"

His opponent ceased struggling at the sound of Bartlett's voice. "Barty?"

"Have you gone nutters?"

"What's going on here?" Noyes demanded, pushing his way to the deck. "Finally awake, Dawkins? Good. We need every rifleman. Grab your weapon, we've got incoming enemy dropships."

"You got it, Sarge." Dawkins got to his feet, tucking his knife back into his boot. "Sorry, Murdoch. I thought I was the only one left."

Murdoch looked at the wound in his arm and shrugged. "Dinna worry about it, 'tis a mere scratch."

"But that's your gun arm â€" "

"Heads up, boys! Dropship inbound!"

The marines gathered up the supplies that Murdoch had dropped and moved them to the relative cover of a low wall on the edge of the deck before sprinting for the ramp leading down. The two sailors from the Autumn stayed on the deck.

"C'mon, ye little aliens!" Murdoch called out as the dropship drifted down.

"Open fire!" Noyes barked, sighting down the barrel of his rifle. The marines obeyed, cheering as one or two Grunts toppled from the descending dropship. An Elite roared out a challenge as it leaped to the ground, his plasma rifle spraying overheated bolts of plasma at the marines. The dropship lifted away, its cannon firing randomly as it sped off.

"Look out!" Reeves shouted, tossing a grenade. A plume of dirt and smoke burst skyward and the flying bodies of three Grunts hit the ground several yards away.

"Get the Elite!"

The marines concentrated their fire on the tall creature, overpowering its shields. Bullets ripped through the alien's body and it fell with a roar. Silence crept over the battlefield as the echoes of rifle fire faded. Murdoch dropped the empty clip from his rifle and replaced it with a fresh one. It was almost too easy.

"All right, Charlie Team. They'll be back for more. Defensive positions! Secure this perimeter."

Murdoch trotted away from the carnage, heading for the lifeboat. A quick dose of painkiller would make this mess go by that much easier. His arm was really giving him hell. Then he thought about Hoyt from Echo Team, and how bravely he bore the pain from the bad plasma burn in his shoulder. He was still able to fight, so Noyes stationed him by the lifeboat with his buddy Patterson.

"No contact here." It sounded like Blackwood from Baker Team.

"South end secure." That was Flaherty.

"Clear on the west end." Dawkins declared.

No report from the east side came over the airwaves. He felt dread sink into his stomach as he approached the lifeboat. "Hoyt?" There was no response. His unease grew. Cautiously now, Murdoch rounded the craft, his rifle point leading. Silent tears formed in his eyes and he lowered his rifle. It wasn't necessary to be on his guard anymore.

Hoyt and Patterson lay face-down on the ground, only feet apart. The heavy scoring on their bodies showed that they had been hit by a plasma cannon. Probably from that dropship as it departed. Spent shell casings littered the ground. They had fired back, the brave souls. They hadn't stood a chance, but they fought anyway. Murdoch knelt by their bodies to whisper the final rite. The poor lads.

"Hey, Murdoch. Is it clear over there?"

"Aye. I'll coverâ€¦ I've got this side."

The others fell silent for a full minute, picking up on the choked pain in the Scotsman's voice. Murdoch took the dogtags from both men

and tucked them into his ammunition vest. These two would never get a proper burial, but by God their families would know they died heroes.

"Heads up, Covenant dropship incoming!"

Murdoch straightened up, following the approaching dropship. He'd fight these bastards until he ran out of bullets, and then he'd use his empty rifle as a club. He'd go down fighting like Hoyt and Patterson.

"Come on, ye bloody cowards! I've got a present for ye!"

* * *

>"School is now in session!" Corporal Phillips cried.<p><p>

"Get 'em, they're running!"

Phillips vaulted over a boulder, swiftly changing magazines as he landed. Screeching Grunts ran in circles, terrified and shooting wildly at the marines. Two Elites darted around the hillside, evading fire but dangerously accurate with their own shots. Somebody, possibly Dawkins, heaved a grenade at one of the Elites. The pineapple exploded harmlessly, its target too far outside the blast radius. The Grunts were mostly dead, but the two Elites were proving difficult.

The corporal fired a quick burst at an Elite, then dove for cover to change magazines again. This was getting bad. He was down to three full clips. They would go fast and then he would be in real hot trouble. Phillips palmed his last grenade, pulled the pin with his teeth, and gave the device a good heave. It landed near enough to one of the Grunts that the blast took it down.

Rifle fire rang out from the ridge behind Phillips, stitching a line in the dirt at the feet of an Elite. But that was impossible! There was no one over there. He ducked behind a rock to look back. A two meter tall figure in green armour jumped down from the ridge and loped unhurriedly across the ground. The Master Chief to the rescue again.

"Look, a Mark V!"

"The cavalry has arrived!"

The marines fought with a renewed vigour. How could they lose with a Spartan fighting alongside them? Phillips fired at the two Elites, then watched in amazement as the Master Chief hammered one in the face with his rifle butt. The alien fell dead and its companion took a swing with its plasma rifle. Concentrated rifle fire zipped past the Chief to perforate the alien's shields. With its attention divided, it was easy to take it out. Phillips jogged toward the Spartan with Sergeant Noyes.

"Good to see you, sir. Welcome to the party."

Noyes sighed. "It's a mess, sir. We're scattered all over this valley. We called for evac, but until you showed up, I thought we were cooked."

Cortana's voice filtered through the Chief's helmet speakers. "Don't worry, Sergeant. We'll stay here until evac arrives."

"Heads up! I got a Covenant dropship headin' in, over here!"

Phillips saluted the Spartan before taking off. It wasn't quite so hopeless anymore.

* * *

>"This is Pelican Echo Four-Nineteen. Anybody read me? Repeat, any UNSC personnel respond."<p><p>

Bartlett squinted into the sky, searching for the Pelican. There it was, high overhead. He waved in relief despite knowing that the pilot wouldn't be able to see him.

"Roger, Echo Four-Nineteen. This is Fire Team Charlie. We read you five-by-five. That you, Foe Hammer?" Sergeant Noyes answered.

"Roger, Fire Team Charlie. Good to hear from ya."

"If you're not too busy, Foe Hammer, we could use a lift. We have survivors to transport to the command shuttle."

Cortana's voice came over the radio. "Foe Hammer, we need you to disengage your Warthog. The Master Chief and I are going to see if we can save some soldiers."

"Roger, Cortana. Okay, Charlie Team, Warthog deployed. Saddle up and give 'em hell."

"Roger, Foe Hammer. Stand by to evac survivors and transport them to safety."

"That's affirmative. Echo Four-Nineteen staying on station. Foe Hammer out."

"The Master Chief and I need some backup, can you spare a few men?"

Charlie Team gathered up their meagre supplies and ran for the dropship. Bartlett slung his rifle over his shoulder, whistling a cheerful tune.

"All right, volunteers step up! The rest of you, get in the dropship." Noyes barked.

Dawkins sprinted for the Warthog and leaped up into the gunner's seat.

"Aw no you don't!" Bartlett exclaimed, reaching the passenger's seat. "You ain't gonna have all the bloody fun, mate!"

The Master Chief climbed into the Warthog and the engine rumbled to life. Behind them, the Pelican lifted into the air. Bartlett coughed in the dust kicked up by the dropship's engine wash, then the Warthog

was speeding forward. He planted his left boot against the dashboard and held on.

"Woo-hoo!" Dawkins yelled as the vehicle bounced down over a hill.

A cave of some kind became visible as the Warthog turned sharply. The abrupt darkness left Bartlett blind. Only the harsh glare of the Warthog's headlights illuminated the gloom. It was an endless tunnel they sped along, broken only by sharp right-angle turns. He felt his stomach begin to churn. Where in the hell did the Spartan learn to drive?

Ahead, there was a cavern. At last, the vehicle slowed. Bartlett brought his rifle up as he spotted an Elite walking across the road. His finger was just tightening on the trigger when the chaingun mounted on the back of the Warthog clattered to life. Dawkins whooped as the stream of bullets from his weapon ripped through the Elite, dropping its shields in a heartbeat.

"Keep it steady now!"

The Master Chief whipped the wheel around, pushing the vehicle around in a wild fishtail. The skidding 'Hog slammed into a Jackal and crushed it underneath the large tires. An instant later, the vehicle was hurtling toward a pair of Grunts. Bartlett felt his turkey dinner rising and leaned out over the ground to throw it up. Motion sickness always got him. He wiped away the drool from his chin and gripped his rifle in time to be pressed back into the seat by the Warthog's tight spin.

Suddenly, the wild manoeuvres ceased and the Chief bounded out of the vehicle. Relieved, Bartlett sagged against the well-cushioned seat.

"Is it over yet?" The Londoner asked after a minute.

Dawkins laughed. "Not yet, bro. I told you not to eat that turkey. It's horrible!"

"Aye. I'll remember that."

Heavy footfalls approached and the two marines aimed their weapons. The Master Chief was back. Bartlett groaned as the Warthog started to move again. The Corps never told him that he would end up as a passenger on the roller coaster ride from hell.

* * *

>A Pelican dropship was sitting inside a ring of glowing light-rods, busily unloading wounded sailors. There were people everywhere on the ground. Some enterprising crewman had set up a tent for treating the wounded in relative sterility. A few officers' caps bobbed through the milling crowd of people. Sergeant Noyes scanned the bulky command shuttle for any sign of One Company's flag. It was always the first thing to go up, even in enemy territory. It meant the Company CO was present. He didn't see it, but maybe that wasn't a bad thing. A lot had been left aboard the Autumn.

A flash of movement below caught his eye. Someone was tying a flag to the shuttle's communications antenna. Noyes smiled. The Captain of

Marines was down there. Good. All was not lost.

"I'm bringing us down." Foe Hammer told them.

Noyes tightened his grip on the edge of the bulkhead. He never liked landings. "All right, Marines. When we're on the ground, I want the wounded to report to the medical tent. The rest of you find whatever's passing for a mess hall and get some chow."

Charlie Team shouted to be heard over the Pelican's engines, but they acknowledged. Their dropship descended gracefully next to the other Pelican. The marines jumped out and dispersed to their separate destinations. Noyes hopped to the ground, trotting away from the billowing dust cloud. He had to find the CO and report.

"Sergeant Noyes?"

"Sir!"

The lieutenant smiled tightly. "Captain Murphy would like to see you straight away at the command shuttle. Follow me."

"Yes sir." Noyes followed the officer down the hill from the landing zone.

"Where's Private Dawkins?"

"With the Master Chief, sir. They're going to recover as many men as they can."

"Good." The officer sighed in clear relief. "He always likes to be in the thick of things. Should have been a damned Helljumper!"

Noyes chuckled. He recognised the officer now. The Company XO had two brothers, both marines and both assigned to One Company. "He's a good marine, sir. One of my best."

"Good to see you, Sergeant. I didn't think many marines made it off the Autumn." Captain Murphy said, returning Noyes' salute. He stuck out his hand. "I've gathered the other platoon sergeants, at least the ones who managed to get here."

"Yes sir. How bad is the situation?"

"Bad, but it could be worse. Everyone but Sergeant Adams is present. I think that's a good sign, but—" the captain grinned wearily. "Since when has good luck ever lasted for us?"

"I'd like to think we make our own luck, sir."

"Yes. Take a seat somewhere, if you like. I've got a quick update for you all." He waited until Noyes had settled onto the ground. "What you see here is all we have to work with. Minimal air support, barebones medical facilities, hardly any repair or maintenance capabilities. At best we're a temporary camp and poorly defensible one at that. There are not enough people here to mount an adequate resistance, at least not at this location. Our nearest cover is half a kilometre away and if the Covenant come knocking, we might as well just open the door and let them in." The assembled sergeants shifted uneasily. Murphy lost his half-hearted smile. "It's too soon to know

what happened to Captain Keyes or the command crew, but we do have the benefit of Major Silva and his ODST platoon."

A ripple of contempt shivered through the air but was quickly squashed. Murphy went on, "There is a single Longsword fighter available to us and the chief maintenance tech tells me that it should be operational within a day. That's the extent of our airpower."

"Don't we have any of the armour support from the _Autumn_?"

"A handful of tanks and Warthogs are all. If we knew where the _Autumn_ crashed, we might be able to risk a raid or two for weapons and supplies, but she went down too long after we did."

"What about the Company, sir?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that. I stayed aboard as long as I could, helping repel boarders. Captain Keyes ordered me to abandon not long after most of the crew was well away. I haven't had the benefit of a complete Company-wide report yet."

"We're scattered all over the damn place." Noyes said feelingly. "My platoon is in pieces. All of Alpha Team is missing, only two from Bravo made it off the _Autumn_, and Charlie has two men with the Spartan."

Captain Murphy sighed, looking at his sergeants' weary faces. Some were nodding slowly in silent acknowledgement of Noyes' report, while others were merely waiting expectantly for him to make a decision. Murphy rubbed his temples and let out a resigned breath. "Give me a breakdown of your platoon status, each of you."

The picture that the sergeants painted was a grim one. Out of the twenty-six fire teams that the _Autumn_ had carried, there were only fifteen completely accounted for, six that had missing or wounded, and at least three teams entirely wiped out. It was huge tactical nightmare and there was precious little time to spend searching for the missing marines. The Covenant were landing search parties of their own in large numbers. Even with the force that had managed to reach the command shuttle, it was woefully insufficient to repel a prolonged assault. There was no time, but he would not leave his marines hanging. Murphy glanced at his Company XO, who was looking out over the milling crowd of marines a few yards below them. The lieutenant turned his gaze to the older officer after a moment, feeling his CO's eyes on his back.

"Sir?"

"Send a runner down to Major Silva's platoon. I would like to borrow some of his men for search and rescue missions."

"Yes sir." Dawkins saluted and hurried off to carry out the order.

Murphy faced his sergeants. "Gather your platoons and reorganise your fire teams as best you can. I want one team from each platoon for search and rescue."

A Pelican roared overhead, heading for the makeshift landing zone.

The captain shaded his eyes in an effort to see if there were any passengers. It looked like there were. "Sergeant Johnson, get over there and find out who's in that dropship."

"Yes sir."

"All right. Let's hope that's one of the missing teams. One team from each platoon is to meet here in half an hour. I want every man to carry enough ammunition to get through a retreating firefight. Our stores are limited, so I don't want to hear about any trigger-happy marine wasting bullets."

"Yes sir."

"Dismissed."

The sergeants moved down to round up their platoons. Murphy watched them go until they were lost amid the crowd of armoured bodies. He turned away to look toward the newly-arrived dropship. With any luck, there were more marines aboard it. He needed every man in order to defend the surviving crew who were steadily trickling in. The Captain of Marines sighed. Time was against his Company, but he held out hope for a miracle.

"Sir, Major Silva sends his regards, and six men to assist in search and rescue."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Make sure his men meet here in half an hour."

Dawkins saluted. "Yes sir," he said, and scampered off. Murphy fished a pipe from his pocket and knocked it against his palm to shake loose dried flakes of tobacco. With another sigh, he stuck the pipe stem into the corner of his mouth. Miracles. He didn't put much store in them before now. Maybe it was time to start believing.

* * *

>The Warthog bounced roughly over a dip in the ground and powered up the next hill. It went airborne as it crested the hill, seeming to float for a second or two before touching down. Sam Dawkins pumped his fist in the air, a wild, excited whoop bursting from between his lips. This was great! The ride of his life! In the passenger's seat, his bunkmate Tommy Bartlett had turned a sickly shade of green. He had a white-knuckled death grip on the dashboard, his rifle tucked securely between his legs.<p><p>

"Aw, what's the matter, Barty? Not enjoyin' the scenery?"

"Not funny, mate!"

"Quit bein' sour! This is great!"

Bartlett only shot him a withering glare, then leaned out over the ground to empty his stomach again. Dawkins laughed. The Londoner could be a killjoy if he wanted to. It didn't dampen his spirits one bit. He adjusted his grip on the chaingun's trigger handle, swinging the weapon stand around in a quick circle. The world spun wildly and he grinned. No way would he have let Barty get to the gunner's seat before him. This was too much fun.

"Look sharp!" Bartlett called out, tugging his rifle out and unsteadily aiming. A Covenant Banshee swooped down at the speeding Warthog, its plasma cannon firing. Dawkins whipped the chaingun around and crouched low, swinging the muzzle skyward.

"Say hello to my little friend!" He yelled and squeezed the trigger. The Banshee screamed past overhead, but Dawkins tracked it, continuing to fire. A fireball blossomed from the craft and the body of the Elite pilot tumbled to the ground like a broken doll. Seconds later, the wrecked Banshee crashed, tearing huge gouges in the earth. Dawkins grinned fiercely. Chalk up another one!

"Look, another lifeboat!"

Dawkins swivelled the chaingun around to cover the crashed lifeboat. "The weapons locker must've broken open, there's supplies all over the place. Where are the bodies though?"

The Chief pointed the Warthog toward a pair of glowing beacon lights marking a path over a steep hill. Bartlett swore as the vehicle bounced over the ridge and picked up speed down an equally sharp bank. A Jackal squealed and pointed, raising the alarm, then the fishtailing Warthog smashed him into the ground. Dawkins swept his gunsights around to target the Grunts running toward the stopped vehicle and opened fire. The Master Chief leapt out, ducking behind the wall of the structure they stopped beside. Rifle fire cracked from his side of the wall, moving steadily away.

"Eat it!" Bartlett shouted, throwing himself out of the 'Hog. "Cover me, Dawk!"

"Rough and ready!" Dawkins shouted back, spent shell casings whizzing past his right cheek at a furious rate. An Elite roared out a battle challenge and pounded toward the marine gunner. Bartlett flicked a frag grenade at it as Dawkins stitched the alien with a hail of automatic fire. The grenade's explosion shredded the dead alien, flinging its mangled body into the air to land on top of the odd-shaped wall running around the structure. The few remaining Grunts shrieked and ran.

"Ahh fuck!" Dawkins cried as a Grunt peppered him with fire from a needler. The tiny darts stuck to his armour and clothing, exploding like miniature firecrackers. He hissed and swore again when he whipped the chaingun around to wipe out the little creature. Those things _hurt._

The two marines' radios crackled at the same moment. "I've called for an evac."

"What the hell is she talking about?"

Bartlett ripped off his shirt sleeve and folded it lengthwise to tie it around a wound on his calf. "Probably found some other marines. I'm bloody surprised any of 'em are still alive!"

Marines appeared from behind the wall, two sailors with them. The Master Chief was not far behind. He got back into the Warthog and Bartlett sprang the short distance to the passenger's seat as the vehicle started to move.

"Don't wait or anyfing," the Londoner muttered.

"There's another!"

The marines running after the Warthog opened fire at the Elite and Grunts standing on the deck of the larger structure above them. Dawkins crouched low to get the aliens in his gunsights but the Warthog sped under the deck and he held his fire. A split second later, he had another chance as more aliens came into view.

"Come to ol' Dawk, I got a present for ya!"

Two Grunts fell dead and the third ran for its life. Bartlett tracked it and dropped it with a well-aimed headshot. Sporadic rifle fire from the other side of the structure faded away after a few minutes. Dawkins gave the area a thorough scan and grinned.

"All clear now."

There was a final, quick burst of fire and then Cortana's voice came over the radio. "That's the last of them."

"Roger. I'm on my way."

The Warthog came to a stop near the cliff edge. Bartlett tumbled out and kissed the ground. Other marines trotted into view, pausing to collect dropped supplies from two bodies. A Pelican flew by overhead, circling around in preparation to land. Dawkins jumped from the gunner's seat and unslung his rifle. That ungainly dropship was the most beautiful he had ever seen. The pilot activated the clamps to secure the Warthog as the marines clambered into the passenger bay. Bartlett took the seat next to him, closely followed by the Master Chief.

"Welcome aboard, Master Chief. Ready for dust-off."

"We should move out, Lieutenant." Cortana said, making Dawkins wonder if the Spartan himself ever spoke. "And then we'll need your help on a rescue mission."

The dropship lifted away from the ground and picked up speed. Dawkins wished that they could have stayed down there just a little bit longer. He wanted to take the Warthog for a quick ride back over those hills. A grin came onto his face. The Corps had never told him that he would have been a passenger on the greatest thrill ride imaginable.

* * *

>"Sam?"<p><p>

"Mikey!"

Lieutenant Michael Dawkins ignored the surprised stares of the other marines and tackled his brother. The two men tussled playfully on the ground before Michael got the younger man in a headlock. A second later, Sam tapped out and Michael released him.

"How is it you always get the upper hand?" Sam asked, using his

brother's offered hand to stand. "I got top marks all through basic for hand-to-hand combat."

"You're not the oldest, you're not allowed to win."

"Bullshit."

"Watch your tongue, Sammy, you're in the presence of the Company XO."

"Sorry, Mikey _sir._"

Michael laughed and hugged the younger man. "Good to see you made it off the _Autumn._ It was pretty hairy for awhile."

"No kidding. We picked up a couple guys from Echo Team before abandoning, but we lost them after we landed. Hoyt and Patterson."

"Dammit."

"Have you seen Nick? The last I saw him was back on the barracks deck."

Michael shook his head, turning to walk toward the command shuttle. "No. His team is still listed as missing, but there are still lifeboats unaccounted for. We've got search teams combing the valley for them and the others now."

"Is the rest of Charlie Team here? Me and Bartlett were with the Master Chief, picking up some marines in our area of the valley."

"Last I knew they headed out with Fox Team in Bravo Twenty-Two toward a lifeboat beacon about six kilometres down-spin. That was about an hour ago. I don't know if they're back yet."

Sam sighed and pulled off his helmet. "Crap. I was hopin' to get back in time to go with them."

"Sorry, little brother. Listen, standing orders are for everyone just coming into camp to see the medics over there, then to grab some chow. Looks like you're gonna need some new armour, too."

"Those needlers are a fuckin' nuisance," Sam agreed, reaching around to feel the holes in his armour plate. "They burn like hell."

"I bet. Get up to the medics' tent. I'll tell the Captain you're back. He'll want a report from you at some point."

"Wonderful."

"Hey, be happy. There are worse things you could be doing." Michael slapped his brother on the shoulder. "I'll be down at the armoury sorting out the useless stuff. Pop in for a moment when you're done with the Captain."

"Whatever." Sam started to turn away, then he saw the Company CO

leaning against the shuttle, enjoying a brief respite from his duties. "Yes sir, I'll do that," he said to his brother, sketching a quick salute. He trotted away and Michael caught the captain's eye. Murphy only nodded at him, but Michael could have sworn he saw the flicker of a smile cross the other man's face. It was hard to tell for sure. The lieutenant headed toward the lifeboat that was serving as the Company armoury. It didn't much matter anyway, but at least the captain knew to let his marines be human.

* * *

>"Privates Dawkins and Bartlett reporting as ordered, sir."<p><p>

"At ease, Privates." Murphy blew out a last breath of smoke before sticking his thumb into the pipe, extinguishing the smouldering tobacco. "You're already aware that your team is currently engaged in rescue operations, so I won't repeat the news. The Master Chief has given me his report of your own rescue mission. Good job. We need every marine we can find."

"Thank you sir." Dawkins and Bartlett chorused.

"Don't thank me yet. I have a team mobilising to head for the _Pillar of Autumn_'s crash site. We need to get aboard her and salvage whatever supplies we can. If we don't, we're not going to last more than a couple of days here."

"Any word on Captain Keyes, sir?"

"The Covenant have captured him and the command crew. Cortana tells me that they have found the _Autumn_ and secured her. She estimates that the force in and around the _Autumn_ is substantial â€" this may be a one-way trip, but we have to try."

The two marines exchanged glances. "How many men are going, sir?"

"Twelve. The combined elements of India and November Teams, as well as two of Major Silva's boys. There's enough room on the dropship for two more."

"When does the dropship leave, sir?"

"Twenty minutes."

Dawkins straightened his back to a position of attention. "I'll go, sir. It'll be good to be back aboard the _Autumn._"

"I'm goin' too, sir. Can't let anyfing happen to this silly bugger."

"I wish I didn't have to send any of you, but I don't have a choice. We need whatever supplies the Covenant haven't destroyed, weapons and ammo most of all."

"We understand, sir."

Murphy smiled sadly. "Good luck. God willing, you'll succeed." He ignored their salutes, instead sticking out his hand. After a moment

of hesitation, the two marines shook it. "Godspeed, Marines."

The two privates jogged away. Murphy sighed tiredly as he watched them vanish in the growing darkness. He hated sending his men on a certain suicide mission, but the supply situation was critical. Even with the weapons and ammunition recovered from the dead, it was not enough to adequately arm the Company for a prolonged stay. He wished that he could go with the strike team, but the entire survivors' camp was depending him to keep them alive. Major Silva might be able to fulfil that role if Murphy did not, although the ODS major was more concerned with picking fights with the Covenant than he was with commanding One Company and the contingent of sailors. If anything, the major was likely to get everyone killed.

Murphy relit his pipe, inhaling deeply. He felt old, not for the first time. With a sigh, he raked his fingers back through his hair. It was greying at the temples. Crow's feet pinched the flesh at the corners of his eyes, deepening whenever he smiled " which happened rarely these days. He was only thirty-four years old, for Christ's sake, but he looked forty-four. If he survived this hopeless mess, he would see about transferring out of field command. It wasn't right for a mere marine captain to look older than the Corps' commanding general.

He looked toward the landing zone and the marines bustling around the Pelican parked there. They moved with precise urgency as they prepared to leave for what would be their certain death. Regret bubbled up from deep within, but he refused to let it change his mind. Not one of the men he had asked showed any hesitation to volunteer. If anything, they were eager to go. He used the pipe stem to scratch his cheek. His marines made him proud. They fought bravely and were more than willing to risk their lives to protect each other. Those men who were now climbing into the Pelican knew the odds of their survival were dismal but they were going anyway. Their fellow marines were counting on them to bring back whatever they could from the _Autumn._ Murphy thought about his intention to leave these men and hated himself for even considering it. This Company needed him. They looked to him for leadership and confidence. Nobody else knew these marines as well as he did. It was his responsibility to give them back the loyalty that they showed him.

"Captain? Bravo Twenty-Two is inbound with survivors."

"Have them all report to me when they are medically checked out."

"Yes sir."

"Mike."

The lieutenant paused. "Sir?"

"Is your brother with them?"

"Yes sir."

"Good." Private Dawkins' face materialised in his mind. The poor kid wouldn't even get to know that his brother was alive. Murphy felt the silent tears trickle in his soul. Maybe it wouldn't make any difference if he knew or not. He watched the Pelican designated Echo

Four-Thirteen lift ponderously into the air. It certainly made no difference now. Fourteen men were on their way to enemy territory, knowing they were not likely to come back. God, he hated asking such a sacrifice of his men.

The Captain of Marines wiped away the mist from his eyes. Too many men and women were relying on him. The time to indulge his emotions would have to wait.

* * *

>Benjamin Reeves gave his torso armour a final, firm tug, satisfying himself that it was in place. Around him, the rest of Charlie Team finished their own preparations. It was nearly time. The young marine picked up his rifle and slung it over his shoulder. He was strangely at ease. Charlie Team was accompanying the Master Chief on a mission to a Covenant cruiser to rescue Captain Keyes. The Company CO himself had given them the briefing, telling them that just getting aboard the ship would be tough. That alone should have made Reeves nervous but he wasn't. After the fierce firefights with the Covenant on the Autumn and after reaching this ring-world or whatever it was, the idea of infiltrating a Covenant cruiser swarming with the enemy didn't bother him. He wasn't afraid, not anymore.

"Och, laddie, that rifle ain't talkin', is it?"

"Not yet. It has nothing to say to me, anyway." Reeves patted the barrel of his rifle. "But it's got loads to tell the Covenant!"

Geoff Murdoch grinned. "Aye, that's the spirit! C'mon and mount up. We're goin' now."

"Rock and roll!" Dickey Flaherty whooped, vaulting into the Pelican. Corporal Phillips and Sergeant Noyes were already aboard and Reeves noted the presence of the towering armoured figure next to Noyes. The Spartan Master Chief. Child-like awe rippled through him. Under the battle-scarred armour was a warrior. The Chief had pulled Charlie Team's bacon out of the fire twice in the space of a day. Reeves felt honoured to fight beside the Chief. A moment after Reeves and Murdoch took their seats, the dropship shuddered and began its ascent.

"Nervous, rookie?"

"Not a bit."

Murdoch chuckled. "There's a brave lad! Keep your trigger-finger ready and we'll get in and out before the Covenant know we're there!"

"Catch a nap while you can, men. It'll be awhile before we get where we're goin'." Noyes said. Reeves tightened the sling of his rifle and slipped the nylon sling over his head. With the weapon secured against his chest, he leaned back against the bulkhead and closed his eyes. _Don't gotta tell me twice, Sarge._

* * *

>"Look, there it is!"<p><p>

Reeves opened his eyes and yawned. Dickey Flaherty was pointing at the huge cruiser hovering over the ground in the distance. The rookie whistled. "Whoa, man! That is one big fuckin' monster."

"Hear that, mate." Flaherty agreed.

"The enemy has captured Captain Keyes, and are holding him aboard one of their cruisers, the _Truth and Reconciliation_." Cortana told the marines. "The ship is currently holding position approximately three hundred meters above the other end of this plateau."

"No shit," Reeves muttered to himself. _As if we weren't briefed well enough before taking off._ "So how do we get inside the ship if it's in the air? The Corps issued me a rifle, not wings."

Sergeant Noyes glared at him. "There's a gravity lift that ferries troops and supplies between the ship and the surface. That's our ticket in."

"Once we get inside the ship, I should be able to lock on to the tracking signal from Captain Keyes' neural implants."

The Pelican's engine wash kicked up billowing clouds of dust as it descended. Reeves unslung his rifle, ready to hit the ground. Beside him, Flaherty fiddled with the safety catch on his own rifle. Charlie Team was ready to roll.

"Hit it Marines, go go go! The Corps ain't payin' us by the hour!" Noyes barked and Charlie Team leaped from the dropship, fanning out to cover the area. The Master Chief sprinted up toward a path leading to a ridge. Reeves flicked on his rifle's flashlight as he scanned the unfamiliar terrain.

"Get ready to move in to support us, Sergeant. The Master Chief is going to covertly take out as many of the Covenant as he can. Don't open fire until you hear the enemy return fire on us. That should let us keep the element of surprise."

"Great. He gets to have all the fun," Flaherty grumbled.

Geoff Murdoch rumbled a low chuckle. "Isna always our luck to get first crack, ye ken. Dinna worry your wee Irish head, lad. We'll get our share!"

Flaherty's glare lacked malice and Reeves smiled at the Irishman. From around the bend, there were two sharp cracks. The Master Chief was at work. Another two shots rang out in rapid succession, and Reeves heard the faint hum of a plasma rifle firing. He glanced quickly at Corporal Phillips, who was already moving toward the gully. Reeves felt the beginning rush of adrenalin spike his nerves. _Let's go!_

"Let 'em have it!" Phillips called and Charlie Team followed him into the fight. It was short work to put down the few Covenant manning the stationary guns. With the Master Chief's expert sniping, the marines had little to do but concentrate their fire on the big Elite that showed up from around the next bend. Reeves only used half a clip on the stupid aliens. This was a cakewalk!

"Hey! We did it! We're right behind ya, Chief."

Charlie Team ran behind the Spartan, their flashlights illuminating the dark as they constantly swept area for enemy.

"Stop! Motion tracker shows movement around the next bend." Cortana declared.

"We'll be ready to advance as soon as you call for us, Cortana." Phillips said. The marines hunkered down, waiting for the order to move. Reeves' blood was pounding through his veins. Every nerve crackled, every sense on high alert. His ears strained for the slightest noise of hostile fire, anything that would allow him and his fellow marines to join the battle. Stop and go was so much bullshit.

"There it is!" The impetuous young marine pointed at a Jackal aiming a plasma pistol at the Chief. A green glow brightened around the pistol as the alien held the trigger down. It was gathering power for an overcharge shot. "Let's go, let's go!"

He fired two rounds at the Jackal as he raced forward. One bullet ricocheted off the alien's arm shield but the second one found its mark. With a garbled shriek, the Jackal fell out of sight. Reeves held his trigger down, sweeping leaden death at the handful of Grunts running around the narrow path leading to the ridge overlooking the marines' position. Shorter bursts of fire from the other marines echoed deafeningly around the solid rock plateau. His ammo counter clicked down to zero and he ducked for cover to reload. Dickey Flaherty shouted something in Gaelic, then the shooting stopped.

"Area secure!" Phillips reported. Reeves yanked his rifle's charging lever and loped eagerly after the rest of the team.

"Covenant forces detected ahead. The path up on the left should let us sneak up around them." Cortana told them.

"We'll hang back while you get into position, Chief."

Phillips glanced over his shoulder at Reeves, who was quietly humming a marching tune. The corporal shook his head with a bemused grin. "Wish we had some more gung-ho boys like you in the Company, Reevesie. The good ones all became Helljumpers!"

"I'm no fuckin' lunatic, Corp. The real marines are regular riflemen."

"That's what I like to hear," Noyes broke in with a broad grin.

"Cortana to Fire Team Charlie. The Master Chief has the left flank covered. Recommend you move up the middle."

"Roger that," Phillips replied. "Move it, Marines."

"Oh. Yeah." The young marine started to whistle as he sighted in on a Grunt manning a gun turret. "Nighty-fuckin'-night, you Covenant piece of shit."

"Your language is uncalled for, Marine!" Noyes yelled across the firefight.

"Aw who gives a duck, Sarge?"

Dickey Flaherty stumbled as a Grunt peppered him with plasma fire. "Oh, the _burn!_ Come back here and try that again!"

"No running!" Phillips barked.

"Here, lemme get that for ya!"

"Alert! Covenant dropships are inbound."

"Here they come. Give 'em a warm welcome, me boyos!"

The Master Chief's sniper rifle cracked three times and three Grunts toppled over. A fourth shot later, the Elite with them was dead. Murdoch hosed down the two Jackals with a continuous stream of fire.

"See, they're not so tough."

"Don't get cocky now." Noyes warned. Charlie Team ambled along after the Spartan toward a path through the rock face.

"More!"

Two Elites roared at the sight of the marines, but the Chief only gave them a heartbeat to react. He fired two quick shots with his sniper rifle and they were history. The team emerged from the path to find themselves in an open plain, surrounded by a ridge ringed with stationary guns. Covenant patrolled everywhere. The Master Chief sighted and fired at one of the turrets, killing the gunner.

"Hey, nice shot."

"We're directly under the ship now." Cortana announced as the marines spread out, firing at targets of opportunity.

"Are we bad or what?" Phillips cheered.

"If we're gonna board that thing, we need a plan." Reeves said.

The AI construct's voice was slightly irritated. "The Covenant use a gravity lift to move troops and supplies between the ship and the surface. We need to ambush them at the grav lift's loading zone, and use the lift to enter the ship."

"Then what the fuck are we waitin' for? Let's take 'em out!"

A stationary gun opened fire at them as they neared the grav lift. The marines scrambled for cover while the Chief took out the gunner. A lucky shot glanced off Reeves' chest armour.

"Contact, enemy in sight!" Noyes shouted. "Crap, those stationary guns are gonna tear us to pieces."

"Grenade!" Flaherty called, letting one fly.

"Alert! Covenant dropships are inbound!"

Phillips spat on the ground, gingerly touching his cheek where a plasma bolt had grazed him. "Man, there's always somethin'."

"Let's dance, guys. Come on!"

"Eat it, eat it!"

"Look out, they're comin' from the ship!" Flaherty called, speeding up to the top of the ridge.

"I wrapped this one just for ye!" Murdoch bellowed, tossing a pair of grenades at the grav lift. The Elite and its minions were sent flying in the double blast, but there were more dropping to the lift base.

"This is more damn like it!" Reeves whooped. "I'm goin' in!"

"Reeves, what the hell are you doing?"

The young marine sprinted toward the grav lift, the light of battle flashing in his sharp blue eyes. "Come get some!"

An Elite caught sight of the reckless marine and lunged for him. Bullets whizzed all around. Reeves yelled in surprise when the Elite smashed him in the side with its plasma rifle. He hit the ground and rolled, coming up on his knees. The alien's roar rattled his ears. "Eat this, you fuckin' creep!" He snapped, spraying the creature with a prolonged burst of rifle fire. Another Elite landed behind him and grabbed him around the neck, lifting him like he weighed nothing. Reeves wriggled madly in the alien's grasp, struggling to break free. The alien laughed harshly as the other marines' bullets crackled off his shields. It had no fear of death. Darkness was beginning to creep into his peripheral vision. He only had a few seconds before he blacked out. "Who's. Laughing. Now." He choked out, managing to turn his rifle around so he could stick the muzzle into the alien's gut. "Smile."

He hit the ground in a heap as the Elite fell dead. Charlie Team was still firing at the remaining Grunts. Reeves coughed and wheezed, drawing precious air back into his lungs. After only a moment, he got to his feet and staggered a couple steps toward the edge of the grav lift. There was an ominous silence settling over the loading zone. Something wasn't right.

"Reeves! Get outta there!"

"What?" The young marine turned around at the sound of heavy thumps on the lift behind him. Two Hunters had arrived and one of them had spotted him. "Oh shit." The Hunter lunged at him, swinging its large shield. It caught Reeves square in the midriff and sent him flying. Charlie Team let out a collective bellow, opening fire at the two hulking aliens. Reeves hit the ground several yards from the grav lift and lay still, his ears ringing madly. Stars burst and danced across his vision. Closing his eyes didn't help. He tried to roll onto his stomach to help out his team, but it hurt like hell to move. His left arm was pinned underneath him. It wasn't supposed to be bent that way. Fuck. It was probably broken. Reeves felt himself losing

consciousness. Even with the sounds of battle echoing and rolling around the loading zone, the young marine found that he would rather just fade away.

End
file.